DECLASSIFICATION OF DATA GOES ON

Archivist Informs Senators of Vastness of Assignment

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WASHINGTON, May 9 (AP) —Despite cumbersome and time-consuming procedures, the process of declassifying millions of secret Government papers is proceeding on schedule, the project supervisor said today.

James B. Rhoads, the National Archivist who is the acting chairman of the Interagency Classification Review Committee, told a Senate committee hearing:

"There is reasonable basis for optimism" that President Nixon's classification reform order will prove successful in the long run.

But Mr. Rhoads conceded that some requests for declassification of historical documents "are simply beyond the Government's resources at the present time."

An Unfulfilled Request

He cited a request by The New York Times for the United States-Soviet lend-lease agreement and lists of material delivered to the Soviet Union under terms of the agreement in 1942 and 1943.

To consider releasing the material "would have required a declassification review of over 600,000 pages of records," Mr. Rhoads said. Such a task is impossible for the Government to handle, he said.

He also noted that the regulations required persons seeking a declassification review to identify almost exactly the documents they wanted, rather than asking in general terms for papers pertaining to particular incidents.

"Since exact information about the existence of Government documents is often not known, it may be extremely difficult for a requester to comply," Mr. Rhoads said. "This problem, of course, is not unique to requests for classified documents. It applies to any request for Government documents in general."

'Need for Secrecy'

Mr. Rhoads said that classification procedures historically had emphasized "the need for secrecy at the expense of the right to know." He said that the current review process promised to bring better balance to the goals.

However, Representative Patsy T. Mink, Democrat of Hawaii, said that Government officials seized upon legal loopholes to promote unreasonable secrecy.

Mrs. Mink asserted: "The national security exception, originally intended by Congress to be narrowly construed and implemented, has instead been enlarged and expanded by the executive branch to encompass virtually any information the executive branch desires to withhold."

She urged the passage of amendments to the Freedom of Information Act to restrict further the Government's right to classify documents.

Mrs. Mink also proposed the creation of a special House-Senate committee empowered to declassify Government documents on its own.